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ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on the parent-school partnership, especially in early childhood settings, but the effects on parents are less clear than the beneficial outcomes for children. This study considers two prominent conceptions of the influence processes in family-school partnerships in Israel: an educational approach, which emphasizes the benefits of continuity between home and school values and goals; and an ecosystem, or family relations, approach, which emphasizes the potential for family-like qualities in parent-school relations. Two groups of parents and teachers, one of which had participated in an Israeli government-sponsored parental involvement program, and one of which had not, were compared using questionnaires. Results indicated that educational effects and establishment of family-like relations were distinguishable dimensions of parent-school partnerships. Initial analyses indicated that these dimensions were not correlated, and each led to a different pattern of results. The homogeneity of Israeli society may account for this, however, with parental involvement programs having greater influence on educational expectations in societies where parents and teachers have different backgrounds. (Contains 13 references.) (EV)

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HOW DOES THE PARENT--PRESCHOOL PARTNERSHIP WORK?

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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement is multifaceted and it may affect parents in different ways. In this study, two models of parent partnership influences: an educational and a family systems model were used to measure effects of parent participation in preschool. The Department for Parent and Community Education in the Israel Ministry of Education sponsors a Parent Involvement (PI) program that is designed to affect both educational expectations and to create cohesive, social relations. Parents, teachers and children in the program meet about 8 times a year for a variety of joint educational activities. Teachers in the PI program receive training and supervision emphasizing these goals. Parents (N=114) and teachers (N=12) from 6 kindergarten classes responded to questionnaires that assessed developmental expectations and cohesiveness of parent-teacher relations. Three classes participated in the Ministry of Education PI program, 2 classes had no PI, and 1 class ran an unofficial PI program. Results indicated that the educational approach of the Israel Ministry of Education Program related to expectations for development of specific skills, but not to the quality of relations. However, the number of meetings and the personal qualities of each teacher appear more important for building close relations regardless of the program. Thus, these two models appear to provide meaningful dimensions for evaluating the specific effects of parent involvement programs on parents themselves.

HOW DOES THE PARENT--PRESCHOOL PARTNERSHIP WORK?

In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on the parent -school partnership, especially in early childhood settings (e.g., Connors & Epstein, 1995; Long, et. al., 1985; Powell, 1987). Parental involvement (PI) is widely recognized as contributing to the well-being of parents and children's educational achievements. However, the processes whereby PI effects parents are less clear than the potentially beneficial outcomes for children.

The nature of parental involvement is multifaceted (Pugh, 1989) and it may affect parents in different ways. This study considers two prominent conceptions of the influence processes in family-school partnerships: an educational approach, and an ecosystemic, family relations model. Educationally oriented approaches emphasize the benefits of continuity between home and school values and goals. Ideally, parent involvement enables parents and teachers to learn from one another and to establish a consistent set of mutually acceptable expectations (e.g., Fitzgerald & Goncu, 1993; Long, Peters & Garduque, 1985). Ecosystems models emphasize the potential for family -like qualities of parent school relations (e.g., Lusterman, 1989; Powell, 1980; Whitehead, 1988). Cohesion, in particular, has been proposed as an important dimension of family-school relations in early childhood education (Whitehead, 1988). This study was designed to evaluate how parent involvement programs influence parents' and teachers' developmental expectations and their perceptions of family-school relations.

The influences of PI on parental perceptions were examined by comparing two groups of parents. One group consisted of parents who participated in a program designed to foster parental involvement in Israeli preschools. Ideally, the program sponsored by the Department for Parent and Community Education (DPE), in the Early Childhood Education Division of the Israel Ministry of Education is designed to affect both educational and family relations dimensions. Prior to implementing the program, teachers in the preschools with the PI program are given special inservice training in which these dual goals are emphasized. Parents and teachers in the PI program meet together with the children for various joint educational activities in the late

afternoon hours or for parent-teacher discussion groups in the evenings. The comparison group consisted of parents from similar middle class backgrounds who did not participate in any official PI program.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 114 middle class parents and 12 teachers from 6 kindergarten classes. There were 3 classes from the DPE program and 3 classes that did not participate in the program. One of the latter groups held ad hoc PI meetings. These parents, teachers and children met 6 times during the year, but the meetings did not follow the DPE approach and the teacher did not receive specific training. The other two classes held 3 formal parent- teacher meetings. Parents were predominantly Israeli born and had at least high school education (M=13, $s.d.$= 2.25). There were no socioeconomic differences among the groups. Also, parents' responses were not related to the number of children in the family. The teachers all had at least a senior teaching certificate, and there were no differences among the classes according to educational level of the teacher.

Measures

All the parents and teachers completed questionnaires during a spring parent-teacher meeting. Developmental expectations were measured by ratings of tasks appropriate for the kindergarten level (Hess, et al., 1981). These items have been used previously cross culturally in samples diverse as the US, Japan, and Australia (Goodnow, et al., 1984; Hess, et al., 1980; 1981). Findings have indicated that the expectations questions differentiate between teachers and parents (Hess, et al., 1981) as well as parents from different cultural backgrounds (Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton, & Knight, 1984.)

Perceptions of the family-like quality of relations were assessed by an adaptation of FACES (Olson, 1986). The cohesion and adaptability dimensions, taken from Olson's Circumplex Model of family functioning, have been proposed as important dimensions of family-childcare and school relations (Lusterman, 1989; Whitehead, 1988). The 30 item Hebrew version of the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation scale was adapted for use in this study by referring to relations between family and teacher or preschool, rather than within the family or among specific members of the family. Pilot testing suggested that the items were meaningful in school settings. Internal consistency of the cohesion items, computed using Cronbach's alpha, was alpha= .72. For adaptability, alpha was .80. These reliability coefficients are similar to those reported for the Hebrew FACES with families (Teichman, 1987; 1990).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The lack of significant differences between parents and teachers on both the expectations and family evaluation scale is notable. It appears that in Israel, middle class parents and teachers are mainly similar in their developmental goals, regardless of PI. This is consistent with the Israeli context as a relatively small, communal society with a highly centralized educational system (Rosenthal, 1992). In subsequent examination of differences between classes, both teachers and parents were considered together.

With respect to the influences of PI, the results of this study support the view that the effects of parental involvement in preschool are specific to different processes and to the particular goals of PI.

Educational effects. When participation was measured as the number of meetings, there were no differences between the classes. However, the DPE program classes differed from other

groups with respect to several skills reflecting social and educational maturity (polite behavior, shares, answers questions, reads from picture books, counts to ten and use of scissors). (See Table 1).

Influences on family-school relations. Overall, teachers and parents perceived family-school relations similarly. When PI was defined as participation in a DPE program, there were no group differences. However, when classes were grouped by number of meetings, they differed in cohesiveness (See Table 2) although not with respect to adaptability.

The main source of variance among the classes was the difference between the first two classes which were model PI programs, and the last two groups, with minimal PI (See Figure 1).. One DPE group scored lower than the others on both cohesion and adaptability. Qualitative analyses of observations with this teacher suggested that her approach to PI was more formal than the other teachers. This illustrates the potential sensitivity of a family relations measure for assessing qualitative aspects of parent-teacher relations.

CONCLUSIONS

Educational effects and establishment of family-like relations among elements of the ecosystem appear to be distinguishable dimensions of parent- school partnerships. Initial analyses indicate that these dimensions were not correlated, and each led to a different pattern of results. Nevertheless, these results may apply mainly to middle class groups. It may be that within a single, rather homogeneous society, PI may be less important as a policy. tool for changing expectations. Among groups where parents and teachers come from different backgrounds, PI may have greater influence. Preliminary impressions from responses of Ethiopian parents suggest that there are clear differences between the parents and the teachers with respect to expectations.

Ethiopian parents, for example, appear to have a much later developmental timetable and expect social and school related skills to develop only during formal schooling (at age 6 or older). Whether continued PI activities will change these expectations remains to be evaluated.

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Table 1. **PARENT EXPECTATIONS BY PARENT INVOLVEMENT**

Item	Mean Rating		p
	PI Classes	**No PI**	
Speaks politely to adults (e.g. please, thank you)	2.38	2.65	.03
Shares toys with others	2.49	2.73	.02
Answers a question clearly	2.34	2.59	.03
"Reads" a picture book	2.29	2.58	.007
Counts to 10	2.66	2.83	.05
Uses scissors without supervision	2.24	1.98	.05

Table 2. **MEAN ADAPTABILITY AND COHESION FOR KINDERGARTEN CLASSES**

A. OVERALL MEANS

	N	M	S D
Cohesion	126	50.23	6.87
Adaptability	126	44.71	6.50

B. MEAN SCORES BY CLASS AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT

1. **COHESION**

	PI Classes			NO PI		
Class	1	2	3	4	5	6
	51.43	52.41	48.44	50.90	49.53	46.44
	(5.17)	(6.35)	6.51)	(6.81)	(6.83)	(9.36)

2. **ADAPTABILITY**

Class	1	2	3	4	5	6
	47.41	46.08	40.76	45.68	45.05	41.49
	(4.46)	(5.78)	(7.54)	(6.91)	(5.41)	(6.89)

Figure 1. Mean cohesion scores by kindergarten class and parent involvement program